DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 199 715 CS 206 173

AUTHOR Adams, Dale T.
TITLE The Use of Prose Models in Teaching Composition.
PUB DATE Oct. 80
NOTE 11p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southwest Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College (Austin, TX, October 9-11, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Assignments; Classroom Techniques; *Expository Writing; Higher Education; *Models; Student Writing Models; *Teaching Methods; Two Year Colleges; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a model to be followed by students completing a writing assignment. The model, designed originally for writing students at two-year colleges, prescribes the number of paragraphs and the content of each paragraph. Suggested topic assignments are offered, and an example of the use of the model is provided. Four steps are proposed for conducting writing assignments based on models that illustrate the aims and modes of discourse. These steps include assigning for outside reading an essay that follows the model, discussing in class the outside reading and some of the possible topics that might be used effectively with the form of the model, handing out the prescriptive model and the possible topics, and having the students read and discuss other students' essays on the same assignment (usually providing both acceptable and unacceptable examples). The final section of the paper defends the use of models in writing classes, listing four advantages of using the approach. (RL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED199715

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

THE USE OF PROSE MODELS IN TEACHING COMPOSITION

A Presentation to the Annual Meeting of the Southwest Conference
On English In the Two-Year College, Austin, Texas,
October, 1980

By
Dale T. Adams
Lee College, Baytown, Texas

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Dale T. Adams

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS206173

The Use of Prose Models in Teaching Composition:
A Presentation to the Annual Meeting of The Southwest Conference
On English In The Two-Year College, Austin, Texas,
October, 1980

By
Dale T. Adams
Lee College, Baytown, Texas

As college teachers of English, we are always searching for more effective ways of teaching our students how to write. Although we all, at one time or another, have probably screamed "eureka!" in some euphoric discovery of, say, sentence combining, generative rhetoric, aims and modes, or the like, in no way does the idea of a "search" mean that ultimately one of us will discover the vaccine that will not only make painless the teaching and learning of writing skills but will also get both our students andus hooked on a euphoric high with no negative aftereffects. Would that were so and the NCTE would beat a path to our door. The search, nevertheless, is exciting because it continually gives us that morning kick--call it variety, if you like--that is necessary if we are to maintain the enthusiasm absolutely necessary for year in and year out effective teaching that is the existential commitment of our lives. Thus, with varying degrees of success (Those who argue that this alone reveals that composition teaching is somewhere on par with cancer research in finding a panacea miss the point.), English teachers have had their students write using a repertoire of approaches that when analyzed an written up continue to provide the agar-agar (I am aware that agar-agar is used as a laxative as well as a base for cultures.) for articles for our professional journals.

Thus, with these words of introduction and qualification, I enthusiastically recommend an approach to teaching composition to add to that repertoire, an approach that in no way do I claim it to be that miracle vaccine but an approach that has produced for me in my fifteen years or so of teaching freshman composition what I consider the best essays I have ever received--the best being defined as interesting essays I would enjoy reading even if I were not reading them as part of my responsibility as a teacher. That approach is the use of models.

Although I am aware of the sense of the word model as commonly used in our professional journals as, for example in asking who, what, when, where, and why as a heuristic model for the news article or Burke's Pentad as a model for invention, I am using the word in a stricter, more common sense of "serving as a pattern to be strictly followed." Neither use of the word is unusual, however, the former being widely applied as a dais for everything from heuristics to tagmemics to invention and so on, the latter--or its synonym, pattern--being often used in the titles of essay anthologies for freshman composition courses. Ironically, however, the strict meaning of the word, although implied in the titles of these texts, is seldom carried through in the writing assignments themselves in the texts. Indeed, more often than not, essays in freshman anthologies are selected to stimulate discussion and student writing or to serve as models of rhetorical modes. Invention then becomes the problem--how do we get students from the stimulating essay and discussion or an understanding of a particular rhetorical mode to the production of their own interesting essays and/or essays that use the desired rhetorical mode. Certainly invention models in the broad sense of the word--such as Burke's Pentad or Jacqueline Berke's 20 Questions can have the desired results. My experience, however, in using such, what I might call "loose," models with community college students has been less than satisfying with the results often in no way resembling the virtues of the assigned, discussed, and analyzed model in any way. The fault lies not with the essays

assigned nor with our students' ability to understand the general rhetorical concepts, I suggest, but with our failure to give the kind of specific detailed instructions that will insure the kind of essay we invision. Thus if we use the essays in the anthologies--even the student essays now included in many of the anthologies--as models or patterns, we might ask in what specific ways do we expect our students' essays to be modeled or patterned on the assigned selections.

Consider, for example, the following assignment typical, I'm sure, for one of the most anthologized essays in contemporary freshman anthologies: "Using Swift's 'A Modest Proposal' as a model, write your own satirical essay on some topic about which you have strong feelings." Even if we answer all the questions and just blank stares that such an assignment brings out as symptoms in the I-don't-know-what-you-want syndrome, the final symptoms being our own irritation with what we rationalize as students' inability to deal imaginatively with what we consider an adequately stimulating assignment--even then how likely is it that one student essay in a thousand will approximate Swift's classic?

If we are going to use the word model in such a "loose" way, we might as well tell the students to write a classic essay on the topic of their choice. Short of that, however, I would like to illustrate the use of models or patterns in such a way that not only do students know exactly what I want but also write--at least in so far as my experience has proven so--essays that in fact fulfill my every expectation. In short, those results are obtained when we give students detailed instructions of how to follow the assigned model with analysis and discussions of sample student essays that have also followed the model.

Although it is not within the scope of this presentation to illustrate completely this approach, an overview of one assignment given early in a semester, with which I have had success, will illustrate sufficiently. But first some necessary background information.

At my college, as in many community college English programs, entering freshman are required to write a placement essay. On the basis of that essay's score, a student takes either the regular freshman composition course or a remedial (remedial is still a meaningful, non-pejorative word) course, called euphemistically and officially by our staff "developmental writing," and traditionally and dysphemistically by both students and staff "bonehead English." Thus, except for those who somehow slip by the system or simply refuse to take the developmental writing course--since by policy no student, regardless of his or her grade on the placement essay, is forced to take developmental writing--most students in my "regular" first-semester freshman composition courses are not committing major errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar--those demons that assuredly relegate a student to developmental writing. Generally, then, such errors are not my primary concerns.

On the contrary, my overall approach is the aims and modes approach as conceptualized by James Kinneavy. Within this approach I assign essays to illustrate each of the aims of discourse and each of the modes. In addition, I use a standard college handbook for marking errors and individualizing necessary remedial problems; i.e., errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, usage, diction, and the like are marked with numbers or abbreviations corresponding to sections of the handbook where those particular errors are discussed. The students are

responsible for correcting errors by studying those sections of the handbook for which there are corresponding numbers or abbreviations on their papers. They may also get assistance at our open English lab, where an instructor is on duty to assist students with such problems. The more important aspects of grading the papers--content, unity, coherence, organization, rhetorical aims and modes, and the like are taken up in my written comments and marginal notes as well as in class discussions.

Thus, as is clear, the course is quite traditional. What is not traditional, I suggest, is the way I use models. Let's turn then to one of those models I use early on in a semester.

What might you expect if early in a semester on Friday, say, you told your students that using such and such an essay as a model to turn in on Monday a 500-word theme on one of the following topics: little league baseball, rock concerts, family reunions, family vacations, Halloween, Christmas, the senior prom, or senior day, for examples? Only a masochist would welcome the onslaught of mundane, vacuous, cliche-ridden--but nevertheless sincere except for the obviously plagiarized (more to be said about his later)--themes such an assignment would generate from the average freshman. These topics, however, are included in one of my early writing assignments. But to insure that I get something more than the inadequate results I have alluded to, here is what I do.

First, I assign to be read outside of class an essay entitled "In My Opinion" by Eve Silberman, written when Ms. Silberman was eighteen and published in Seventeen in November, 1971. (Permission to reproduce this essay may be obtained from Triangle Communications, Inc., 850 3rd Avenue, New York, New York 10022.) In her essay Ms. Silberman agrees that the pep rally traditional at high schools throughout America is not only not worth the inconvenience and bother it causes many students but that it also can be harmful.

Secondly, in a class discussion the essay is analyzed for aim (persuasion), mode (evaluation), organization and content. Initially, the author asks the reader to "consider this scene." Then she presents images obviously of a pep rally. In a second paragraph she identifies her images as a pep rally and gives the general comments or cliches one would most likely hear or advocate about the topic--but cliches with which she does not agree (Here a discussion of tone and how tone is created inevitably ensues.) This paragraph ends with the cliche that the pep rally is "something that's enjoyed by everyone." Paragraph three, however, questions that cliche by asking "Or is it?" And then it continues to present the general negative aspects of the topic with which the author agrees. Based on the first three paragraphs, then, paragraph four begins: "The question to be asked is this:," and the author formulates what she considers the central question concerning the topic. Then she adds, "To show you what I'm talking about, let's consider some of the myths surrounding this ritual." Then each of the next five paragraphs begins with one of these myths written in italics so that the rest of each of the paragraphs refutes or exposes the myth. Finally, the last two paragraphs conclude the essay by summarizing the author's position toward the topic.

From the class discussion and analysis of the model essay comes the following assignment sheet--which I do not give to the students until after they have taken notes that essentially produce the same assignment sheet in the students' own handwriting, my feeling being that an understanding of the assignment comes from the discussion and notetaking so that the assignment sheet itself acts as a reinforcement of the students' own understanding of the assignment. (Note that all the phrases and sentences not enclosed in brackets or parentheses are the exact words from the model.)

Adams
English 302

In My Opinion

1) Consider this scene: [In three to four sentences present images so that your reader can visualize the scene--but do not use the name or the term for the scene being presented]

2) This is . . . (or These are . . .) [Identify, that is to say, give the name or term for the scene presented in the first paragraph. In addition, in two to three sentences give the general comments or statements one would most likely hear or advocate about the topic--cliches that you in fact do not agree with.]
It is, we know, . . . (or They are, we know, . . .)[Complete the model sentence so that the next paragraph begins with a logical or coherent question.]

3) Or is it? (or Or they?) [In three to four sentences present the general negative aspects of the topic with which you agree.]

4) The question then to be asked is this: [Formulate what you think is the central question concerning the topic.] To show you what I'm talking about, let's consider some of the . . . [Choose a word, term, or expression that essentially characterizes each of the statements to begin paragraphs 5-8--statements with which you do not agree or which you are going to refute. You may choose such words or terms as myths, arguments for, arguments against, disadvantages, advantages, logic, euphemisms, shibboleths, misconceptions]

5)[Paragraphs 5-7 (an 8th paragraph is optional as part of the body of the paper) should begin with an underlined statement that the rest of the paragraph refutes.]

6)[See 5 above.]

7)[see 5 above.]

8)[Optional. See 5 above]

9)[Write a concluding paragraph that restates your general position toward the topic.]

Suggested Topics

1. Little League Baseball
2. Rock Concerts
3. High School Classes
4. Family Reunions
5. Family Vacations
6. Weddings
7. Wedding Receptions
8. Religious Revivals
9. Traffic Court
10. Criminal Court
11. Christmas Celebrations
12. Easter Sunday
13. Making a Bank Loan
14. Parties
15. Blind Dates
16. The Purchase of a New Car
17. Camping
18. The Senior Prom
19. Summer Camp
20. Senior Day

The fourth step in this assignment consists of having the students read and discuss in class one or two essays by my previous students on this same assignment as for example the following: (Usually, I try to have both an acceptable and unacceptable essay.)

IN MY OPINION

Consider this scene: a junior size baseball diamond with opposing teams composed of young boys who are dressed in team uniforms. The boys are being cheered enthusiastically by parents and friends as the announcer gives a play-by-play description of the exciting game over the loud-speaker.

This is Little League Baseball. It is the actual demonstration of sportsmanship and teamwork under competitive conditions. The all-American boy must play Little League Baseball. Who can dispute the fact that these boys will grow up to be better athletes, of higher moral character, and more able to meet the challenge of conditions in the real world? Everyone knows that playing on a little league baseball team is beneficial to any young boy.

Or is it? Sometimes children are rushed to the game or practice when they have not been properly fed, are encouraged by parents to participate when they are really not interested, or are "drafted" on teams where they feel uncomfortable or unwanted. To be late for a game, or to miss daily practice is a serious offense. The activities of the entire family must be scheduled around Little League.

The question then to be asked is this: is Little League Baseball really worth the bother and the inconvenience it causes? I have come to the conclusion that not only is it not - but that indeed Little League Baseball can actually be harmful. To show you what I'm talking about, let's consider some of the myths surrounding this activity.

<u>It teaches principles of good sportsmanship</u>. Some coaches and managers think only of winning. A child is taught that the score of the game is the most important thing. A child must be very aggressive and use every possible advantage. If the child can intimidate another player, his team might win the game. Boys who are not good players might get to play only a few innings all season. A child can be very sensitive because he "can't catch the ball". Young players are yelled at and embarassed when they "strike out".

<u>It teaches teamwork and cooperation</u>. A boy may believe that he, as an individual, is the primary cause of a win because he is such a good player. In some cases this may be true, but often a child has a false sense of ability or accomplishment which could result in the development of arrogant, domineering qualities.

<u>It's good exercise</u>. Some believe that this type of activity is actually harmful to the development of a child's muscles and bones. A child may have problems when he gets older because of excessive use of his pitching or throwing arm.

Continued on page 2

It contributes to a closer father-son relationship. At times, a son's position on a baseball team is more meaningful to the father than to the son. Some parents seem to feel that this inspires more masculine qualities in their sons and it contributes to the parent's own egotism. Parents may be very angry and argue with a manager because "You took my son out of the game", or "You should have done this instead of that". Some managers feel that parents are the main problem with Little League. Some sons are humiliated by a parent's behavior. To get a heated argument out of some parents, all you have to do is mention "Little League".

It consumes spare time that a child would use unproductively. While it's true that a child may not have as much time to get into trouble, it's also true that this may detract from other things that could be constructive or enjoyable. A parent may have to rush home from work or from an important meeting in order to transport son to a ballgame or practice. This is an everyday obligation, too. A child may be deprived of music lessons, attendance at a friend's birthday party, or other activities because he must be at practice. Family vacations must be delayed until late summer or possibly even cancelled.

The teaching of good sportsmanship, teamwork, and ethical conduct seems to have become over-shadowed by the desire to win. The managers who let the uncoordinated, physically weak boys experience the enjoyment of playing in games, do not have winning teams. Managers and parents use Little League for their own interests instead of for the benefit of the boys. How many boys elect to continue in baseball and play in the teenage league after they are old enough to make their own decisions?

While many boys do benefit from their Little League activities, I believe that the majority of boys have experiences and memories that are detrimental to their development of desirable qualities. More emphasis should be placed on the principle that, while winning is important, it is more important that the win be accomplished in fair, honest, unselfish competition. Let's return Little League to the boys.

Although the criticism might be leveled that such an assignment locks in students to too ridged a model and doesn't allow them room for creativity or original thinking, even forcing them to plagiarize another's organization or at least to use another's organization as a crutch, such criticism doesn't hold up when the advantages of using this model in the prescribed way are considered. First, the assignment is made early on in the semester when my concerns are mainly diagnostic in determining a student's ability to write clear, indicative sentences. I am not concerned at this point with the student's ability to come up with an original approach or organization. Secondly, the model was written by an 18-year-old about a familiar topic, facts which along with the study of sample essays written by my former students on the same assignment give the new students confidence that they too can write an acceptable paper for the assignment. At the very least, it gives them a realistic model to imitate, unlike, for example, many of the professionally written essays in the standard freshman anthologies. Third, the assignment calls for an opinion, something that all the students have and generally are willing to give freely. What their essays generally lack is the effective presentation of that opinion. The assignment under discussion provides the vehicle for the effective presentation of an opinion.

Here, I might add, an intrinsic aspect of the assignment refutes the possible charges of lack of creativity and original thinking. The students are forced to think about a common topic in a way that challenges platitudes and cliches about that topic. And while many students may have always harbored gut reactions to the platitudes and cliches about their chosen topic, they have seldom had the opportunity, the courage, or the encouragement to express those reactions in writing. Most important, however, is that because the directions are so explicit and because the organization is prescribed, the majority of the students, who by virtue of having passed the placement examination are not committing major errors in mechanics, write essays that I can praise and generally praise with some enthusiasm. The confidence that such initial priase builds and the effect that confidence has on the quality of students' future essays may be difficult to evaluate but it cannot be overestimated.

Equally important are the advantages that hold true not only for this specific assignment but also for the models approach in general. First, my use of models grew out of and confirms, I believe, one essential principle of the aims and modes approach: that writing is best taught through a concern for the whole discourse. Yet the problem with being concerned with the whole discourse early in a semester is that so much must be considered--the aim, the mode, unity, coherence, organization, etc.--that in effect students are being asked to write, and more importantly evaluated on their ability to do so, essays like those expected at the end of a semester. The "In My Opinion" assignment eliminates that problem because so much is given that the whole discourse can be considered while only those diagnostic elements not prescribed need be looked at specifically. Parenthetically, I might add that as a semester progresses the directions for assignments based on models become less prescriptive.

Secondly, a matter closely related to my concern for the whole discourse, came out of my dissatisfaction with papers written within a typical fifty-minute class setting and the corresponding dissatisfaction with the obvious plagiarism, intentional or otherwise, of papers written outside of class. The former is explicable in the simple truism that good writing is re-writing, and while there is some virtue in being able to write impromptu, even a necessity for it as in taking essay examinations no writer who writes to be read works under the pressure of a fifty-minute time limit. (Parenthetical, I might add that a special unit on writing for essay examinations is included in the freshman composition course I teach.) The latter, plagiarism, is essentially eliminated by the organizational and syntactical requirements, for example, in the "In My Opinion" assignment and in the other assignments by the students' inability to locate non-existing essays that follow the prescribed models. Of course, none of this prevents collusion, but the instructions for each essay based on a model come out of class discussion and analysis of the model essays so that even collusion would require the student to give his or her co-conspirator such detailed instructions that writing the paper itself would be simpler. At any rate, my discussion here probably appears that I am more concerned about plagiarism and collusion than I am. In fact, neither has been a factor in my use of models in teaching freshman composition.

Another advantage of the models approach is that students can produce long--i.e. 500-word-essays without the obvious padding that that dreaded and quite arbitrary requirement usually solicits. In fact, no arbitrary word length is ever given. The nature of the assignment and the model obligates the students to do something; once that is done, they are told to stop and count the pages. What is important here is that the students are required to do something--to produce an essay based on a model and following specific instructions. Unlike composition classes where students write only short in-class papers in essentially impromptu writing, students in a class using the models approach must do a significant amount of writing out side of class.

A final advantage of the models approach is that all the students are working on the same essential assignment yet are producing individual and different essays. This is an advantage because the reality of teaching a composition class--or any class for that matter--is that essays must be evaluated and graded if for no other reason than the students demand it. To grade papers, an instructor must have some criteria. Absolute standards of mechanics, organization, word length, etc. are unrealistic within the aims and modes approach if not indeed within any approach. The models approach gives the instructor the criteria of the specific requirements of each assignment based on a model while allowing the students to write individual essays within the framework of the prescribed model. In short, it is much easier for teachers to be equable in grading papers when all the papers are on essentially the same model.

Lee College
Baytown, Texas